

Don Linden

The venues and audiences of those early days were exciting and a great training ground.



Donaldson Charles Linden was born on December 21st 1938, to Greta (b. Munroe) and Charles Linden. His sister Janet was born 6 years later. Charles and Greta met on Rangitoto Island in 1925 where later they would own a family bach. His mother was a gifted contralto, successful in both the Cambridge and Hamilton singing competitions and a trained milliner and seamstress, skills which would be put to good use later as Don's act developed. His father Charlie was a carpenter, athlete, champion boxer and masseur; in 1927 he worked on the *Waitaki Hydro Project* in the South Island. In 1932 he established Auckland's first gymnasium at the corner of Pitt St and K'Rd, the *Auckland Gym and Health Academy*. As well as training local boxers the gym brought in professional overseas athletes. Don's grandfather was an Australian professional sprint champion and both Charlie and Janet were keen runners.

Under the auspices of the *Auckland Boxing Association*, Charlie taught boxing in local intermediate and secondary schools. In the late 1940s he became the public relations officer for the *Community Sunshine Association*, an organisation that operated a children's health camp and catered for young and old in the inner city. Located in Nelson St it later become *Boystown*. In 1950 he was appointed press liaison officer to visiting world media at the *Auckland Empire Games*. He was campaign manager for two successful Mayoral candidates, John Luxford and Sir Dove-Myer Robinson, and served as a councillor on the *Mt Roskill Borough Council* from 1956 until 1974. As Chairman of the *Public Relations Committee* he organised the council's *Carols by Candlelight*, an annual event that attracted a crowd of up to 25,000. Don learnt a lot about sound by assisting Phil Stebbing, the recognised specialist in this field at this time



Don attended *Grafton Primary, Dominion Road Primary, Balmoral Intermediate* and *Seddon Tech*. In 1952 he took elocution lessons and competed in the annual *Auckland Competitions*. He took a radio servicing and electrical apprenticeship with *Bond and Bond* and was introduced to the magical world of tape recorders and the beginning of what would become a very popular mime routine. Today it's called lip-syncing.

The Linden family were well known for their beautiful singing voices. Two of Don's cousins, Jack and Billy Langford were members of *The Stardusters*, a popular vocal group that recorded *Opo The Crazy Dolphin* in 1955 with Pat McMinn. 'One Sunday along with Laurie North, a family friend from Rangitoto Island, Jack and Billy were visiting our home in Hazel Ave. I'd borrowed a tape deck and the three of them started singing and harmonising as I recorded them and that was the beginning of *The Stardusters*.' Janet became a very popular vocalist at the *St. Seps* dances and in 1960 she recorded *Blue Skies* and *Among My Souvenirs* for Eldred Stebbing's *Zodiac* label.

Don had begun miming to records, having earlier been successful singing in local talent quests. Radio personality Reg Morgan found him gigs at smokos and small functions then he joined Mary Fuller's *Fullers Entertainment Agency*. RSAs, company socials and a variety of engagements kept him very busy. He also worked the holiday circuits throughout the North Island. Very soon his performances became very comedic as he mimed to sound tracks edited in his home studio.



With as many as 2 to 3 shows a night (as many as eight come Xmas) Don was able to quit his job at *Bond and Bond* and go full time. He did warm up acts for Gene McDaniels, Johnny Ray, Louis Armstrong, Bobby Vee, Linda Scott and Bobby Vinton.

Bob Sell had seen Don perform at the *Maori Community Centre* and invited him to open his *Colony Nightclub* in April 1959. This led to a long partnership with Bob and Don quickly learned about restaurant operations, later becoming assistant manager and maitre d' of *La Boheme*.



In 1964 Don and his sister based their *Linden Entertainment Services* in the basement providing variety acts, live music and catering.

In 1966 he moved to *Logan Park* as assistant manager and convention organiser of Bob Sell's *Inn in the Park* restaurant, which soon became one of Auckland's top venues. In 1968 he moved to the new *Intercontinental Hotel* as front office manager until early 1970 when he worked on the Auckland wharves for a while then became maitre d' at the *South Pacific Hotel* running their *Meridian Room* and *Cobb and Co Restaurant*.

In 1975 he was invited to perform on the first *Telethon* to launch *South Pacific Television*. It raised \$600k for the *St John Ambulance*; the next year they raised \$1.6m for *Child Health*. *1ZB* invited him to present a travel talkback segment during their woman's hour, sponsored by the *Tourist Association*, and this led to a number of talks being given to woman's organisations.

Don got his first crystal Set when he was 8 and grew up listening to the Sunday morning *Junior Request* programme on *1ZB*, later called the *1080 Club*. As an adult he still enjoyed those songs and stories but felt that it was time for Sunday morning kid's radio to be revitalised. In May 1978 *Don Linden's Small World* went to air on *Radio I*. He knew he had three listeners, his three young nieces, and the program soon established itself as a Sunday morning highlight continuing for almost 20 years; later moving to *Radio Pacific*, *FM Country*, *Today FM* and finally to *Solid Gold FM*.



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Don was at the foundation meeting of the *VAC* at the *Manhattan Lounge* in 1966 and has supported the club ever since, working on the committee from 1979 to 82 and being voted President in 1983. He was presented a *VAC Scroll of Merit* in 1979 and granted the 1982 Benny. Don became involved in many fund-raising events helping organise the first *Air New Zealand's Operation Disneyland* flights in 1979, travelling with them to make regular live reports to both *Radio I* and *Radio New Zealand*. He joined the *Variety Children's Charity* in 1980 and was later honoured with a

Presidential Citation and the *Roy Phillips Award* which recognises a volunteer who has done the most for *Variety* throughout the year. He was a *Variety* board member from 1994 - 2008.

Over the years Don enjoyed a number of pantomime dame roles, notably *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella*, both produced by Keith Leggett for the *Northern Opera Company*. He was *Queen Guinevere* in the *Rose Theatre's* production of *King Arthur*. He moved to the States in 1986 where he studied communications and drama at *Weber State College* in Utah and did voice over work in nearby Salt Lake City. On his return he worked at *Keith Leggett Entertainment* until its demise. Don Performed in Phil Warren's 2002 memorial concert.

Radio, television commercials and films became an important source of his income. He was a casual announcer with *NewstalkZB* and enjoyed being a volunteer with the *Eastern Bays Hospice*, working closely with his long-time broadcasting friend Alice Worsley on an ongoing video project. But he most enjoys being a part of *Penrose Rotary's* one-on-one mentoring programme for year 9 students at *One Tree Hill College*.

In 2011 he had a triple bypass operation. Don now reckons, 'It's the best thing that ever happened to me, forcing me to change my diet and lifestyle.'